DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 457 513 CG 031 305

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TITLE "The Best Thing I've Ever Done": Second Chance Education for Early School Leavers.
PUB DATE 2000-12-00
NOTE 30p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Dropouts; Educational Innovation; Foreign Countries; *High School Students; High Schools; *Outcomes of Education; School Holding Power; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Sydney)

ABSTRACT

Young people who complete senior secondary education are less likely than early school leavers to be unemployed or employed in dead-end jobs. Nevertheless, in Australia around a quarter of the 15-19 year olds continue to leave school without senior high school qualifications. This paper reports on data collected at re-entry institutions in the greater Sydney region and describes their approach to education. It includes students' main reasons for returning; their experiences; opinions; and hopes for the future. Students especially like the quality of the teachers; the adult treatment they received; the atmosphere at the colleges; and the more reasonable rules and regulations at these institutions. The results of the survey showed that it is possible to educate alienated and disadvantaged people in more constructive ways. With a few number of minor changes, the senior colleges were able to re-engage students. The experience of students at the senior college demonstrated how it is more beneficial for some students to engage in a learning environment by choice when they are ready for it. Allowing students to leave education and come back at a later stage may increase retention. Economic goals of the government and these young people may benefit from such an approach. (Contains 53 references.) (JDM)

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"The Best Thing I've Ever Done": Second Chance Education for Early School Leavers

by
Kitty te Riele

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"THE BEST THING I'VE EVER DONE":
Second Chance Education For Early School Leavers[1]

Kitty te Riele

Abstract

Young people who complete senior secondary education are less likely than early school leavers to be unemployed or employed in casual or 'dead-end' jobs. Nevertheless, in Australia around a quarter of the 15-19 age group continues to leave school without a senior high school qualification. Early school leavers tend to be drawn in unrepresentatively large numbers from young people of low socio economic background, government schools, rural areas, boys and Aboriginal background. This paper will give a brief overview of the statistics of early school leaving and relevant government policy.

Young people tend to leave school early because they are alienated from schooling. They have negative relationships with teachers and find the curriculum irrelevant, uninteresting and too hard. It would, therefore, be counterproductive to force these young people to stay at school. Instead, a system of re-entry education is useful, allowing them to return to complete senior high school or equivalent at a later stage. The paper will report on data collected at re-entry institutions in the greater Sydney region, giving a description of the approach to education at these Colleges. The main focus of the paper will be on the reasons for returning, experiences, opinions and hopes for the future of the students.

> **"The College is a great place where you get the teachers' support. The teachers are friendly. The whole College environment is fantastic, the best thing I have ever done."**
> [SSC - 53, female, 20-25]

1. Introduction

Students and schools

Schools do not just process knowledge; they also process people (Apple & Weis, 1983). At a time in life when young people need greater freedom from external controls in order to develop their own independent identity (Rigby, 1990), many high schools emphasise authority and academic competition within an impersonal environment. Most schools expect students to fit in with them, and do not take the expectations of individual students into account. While this is acceptable (if not ideal) to the majority of students, it is alienating to the quarter of young people in Australia who leave school early each year.

Connell et al (1982) highlighted various ways in which students deal with the school environment. Students who are alienated from schooling often have a relationship of

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active 'resistance' with the school. Often, it is the authoritarian structure of the school that they reject. For instance, one of the students in my research, Jane,[2] was having lunch when another girl challenged her to a fight. Despite encouragement from other students she refused to be drawn. But when a teacher came onto the scene he singled out Jane and told her to go to his office. Jane explained:

> I said "No" because I didn't think it was fair that I was getting in trouble when it wasn't even my fault. He said "Why not?", and I said "Because this is my time". He said: "Go to the principal's office", and I said "Why?". He said "Because I told you so". I said "I don't want to, if I do he'll think I'm in trouble". And he said "You are". And so I got expelled. [SSC - 136]

Connell and colleagues argue that resistance like Jane's is shaped by social forces "over and above the authority structure of the school to which it is an immediate response" (1982: 85). While students from all social backgrounds can reject school, resisters seem to be more common amongst working class students. This is partly because the mismatch with school is greater for working class than for middle class students (Bourdieu, 1974) and partly because working class families themselves role model resistance against alienating and authoritarian work environments or government bureaucracies such as Centrelink.

The opposite approach to schooling is what Connell et al (1982) call 'compliance'. Students who work hard and do well accept and engage with the school. These students do not drop out of school, and there are no examples of students like this in my study.

Finally, a large group of students take a 'pragmatist' approach to school (Connell et al, 1982). These are what Brown (1987) in his British research called the "ordinary kids", who put up with what the school expects of them, even if it is not ideal for them. They do what has to be done, without either committing to or actively resisting the school. But their attitude can easily change if they feel school let them down. Jenny is an example of this, as we shall see in detail later in this paper. She was prepared to "stick it out" at school, even though she was not receiving the learning support she needed and wanted. Yet when she was expelled to set an example to all students, after doing something stupid in which many other students were involved, she gave up on school and found a factory job instead.

While Jenny was struggling academically, she felt she had the capability to do the work with some support. Other students also made it clear that they felt they had enough intelligence. As Peter shows, they are not always sure what went wrong:

> In year 6 I would possibly have been considered the smartest person in the school. But then I just found I deteriorated and by the time I left school I wasn't passing one subject. [SSC - 137]

As Connell et al (1982: 105-106) point out "academic success generally depends on the construction of certain kinds of teacher-pupil practices" and these practices are more difficult to construct for working class students. This is due to what Gramsci

(Porter, 1991) calls 'hegemony', which refers to the dominance of cultural ideas and values of powerful groups in society.

In education, certain knowledge and practices have become dominant, which stem largely from ruling class culture. This hegemony is legitimised at least partly by the idea of meritocracy. Despite overwhelming evidence that children from certain groups (working class, indigenous people, some ethnic minorities) often do not do well in school, a belief is maintained in schools that success in education is guaranteed if students combine intelligence with effort. However, the (mostly unstated) consequence of this line of thinking is untenable: that, therefore, students from working class, indigenous or ethnic minority backgrounds must be on the whole either less intelligent or relatively lazy.

Schools are not neutral institutions. Firstly, they hold power over students simply because education is compulsory (up to age 15) and because they hold the key to knowledge and skills that students must obtain, or run the risk of failure not only in school but also in the labour market. Secondly, schools are influenced by the wider society. The knowledge valued in schools, and their ways of doing things, match more closely the cultural capital of middle class and ruling class students than the cultural capital of working class youth (Bourdieu, 1974). This influences the type of relationships that are possible between students (and their parents) and teachers and schools. Where there is a mismatch in cultural capital, these relationships involve less trust and are less constructive, making academic success harder to attain. This is exhibited in day to day practices, such as students feeling they cannot ask teachers for help, and teachers labelling students as "dumb".

Economic change in the past three decades has led to rising youth unemployment and the development of a "knowledge society" in which educational credentials are increasingly crucial. As a result, as Peter (a student in my study) put it, "Economics has got hold of education" [SSC - 137]. These societal changes have further reinforced the power of schools over students, as the risks involved with school failure have become more far reaching. This has induced some students to take a 'pragmatic' approach to schooling, because they have little choice. A small study of Victorian schools showed that 25% of Year 11 students would leave if a job came their way, but for the moment they are reluctantly putting up with school (Dwyer, 1994). Their participation in education may be more 'being present' than 'being actively engaged'.

For another large group of young people, however, even this passive acceptance of school is impossible, and they 'drop out' of school. These young people are mostly 'pushed out' by their experiences in school rather than 'pulled out' by the labour market (Holden & Dwyer, 1992; Spierings, 1999). As a form of counter-hegemonic action, however, dropping out of school is self-defeating. It leaves the school system intact while putting the young person's own (economic) future at risk. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties that most early leavers experience in the labour market, research has shown that the vast majority are happy with their choice to leave, because they feel it is still better than being at school (Ainley & Sheret, 1992; Dwyer, 1996).

Moral panic and paternalism

Although young people themselves may be happy with their choice to leave school early, society - and specifically government - is not. Australian federal government policy has been aimed at increasing school retention to Year 12 for the past two decades. This is evidenced by publications such *as Schooling for 15 & 16 year-olds* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1980*), In the national interest. Secondary Education and Youth Policy.* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987), *and Post-compulsory education and training: Fitting the need* (NBEET, 1992). It is not just that the federal government sees staying on to Year 12 as desirable - it sees early leaving as unacceptable in the light of high youth unemployment.[3]

The Common Youth Allowance (CYA) was introduced with the specific purpose of abolishing income support "for young people up to the age of 17 if they voluntarily abandon education or training" (Kemp, 1999). The dependence of young people on their parents has increased under the CYA as the level of payment is linked to parental income and teenagers are expected to live at home. Only in exceptional circumstances are these regulations relaxed. The government's Discussion Paper, leading up to the introduction of the CYA, stated:

> There has been some community criticism that the easier availability of unemployment payments, which are not subject to a parental means test, may lead some young people to leave education and training early, knowing that they would have money in their pockets even if they cannot find work. (Newman & Vanstone, 1996: 4)

This cynical view of the reasons young people leave school early is contrary to the research evidence that students leave due mostly to school-related factors. Nevertheless, it legitimises government intervention in young people's lives. This idea is explicit in the philosophy of the 'new paternalism', as argued by Mead (1997, 5):

> Society claims the right to tell its dependents how to live, at least in some respects. [...] The assumption [is] that government can know and serve its clients' own interests better than they would themselves.

Marginalised young people are increasingly talked about as being 'at risk' of failing to make the transition adulthood and even as an 'underclass'. This language sensationalises the situation young people find themselves in (Wyn and White, 1997: 23) and contributes to a moral panic about early school leavers and unemployed youth. As Roman (1996:10-1) explains, this moral panic constructs youth as "the focus of fear and moral consternation" and as requiring state intervention.

On the one hand, youth are seen as unable to look out for themselves and needing the guiding hand of "father State'. Young people need to be prevented from making the mistaken decision to enter a labour market "for which they are ill-equipped or unprepared" (Kemp, 1999). On the other hand they are seen as deviant: too lazy to go to school or get a job and likely to drift into crime (Bessant, 1995). Dahrendorf warns that young people will end up in the (by definition unruly) underclass if they are

not taught citizenship and the work ethic (in MacDonald, 1997: 19). Hence the attractiveness of the paternalistic claim that society has the right to enforce behaviour according to its (middle class) norms, and to re-establish 'order' (Mead, 1997).

Paternalism and moral panic about youth perpetuate a 'blame the victim' mentality in government policy while at the same time maintaining a caring image towards young people. However, the focus is on control and discipline. As a result, young people seeking to escape from an authoritarian school are confronted with an equally authoritarian bureaucratic environment. Moreover early school leavers are judged as 'deficient' from the standpoint of the labour market, disregarding other arenas which may be more central to their lives.

Trajectories through education

For many young people life is not a linear and sequential progression through school and possibly further study to work, marriage and adulthood. As Dwyer & Wyn (1998) have argued, large numbers of young people experience more complex life patterns, which involve a blend of study, work and family commitments. There is some evidence that young people *prefer* a mixed pattern of living (Dwyer, 2000).

For young people, constructing their work identity is only part of developing an independent and adult sense of themselves, and not always the most important part (Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000). Work may have more importance as a source of secure income than as a source of status, while leisure activities are more central to young people's identities. Nevertheless, "work is central to inclusion" (Ball et al, 2000: 7), and as work opportunities are increasingly linked to education in our Knowledge Nation (Beazley, 2000) there is pressure on young people to focus on gaining qualifications and acquiring skills for their own, as well as the nation's, benefit. This further marginalises young people whose experiences in school have been alienating, and who in the past would have been able to 'prove themselves' on the job. As Ball et al (2000: 8) point out: "More learning is the last thing they are interested in". There is a danger that old divisions based on material wealth will be partly replaced, partly exacerbated, by new divisions based on 'wealth' of knowledge.

The way these young people travel through life is not necessarily the result of 'rational-instrumental' thought and conscious choice. Ball et al (2000: 15) emphasise the "doubts and indecisions, changes of mind, vague possibilities" in the interviews with young people in their study of post-16 transition in the UK. In Australian research with early school leavers, Holden identifies a number of "time options" for young people once they have left school (1992: 1):

- family - being financially dependent on relatives
- employment - often casual or part time
- income support - unemployment, single parent or sickness benefits
- education - vocational or a return to secondary education
- illegal - stealing and prostitution

These time options are to do with financial support, and ignore choices to do with leisure and social life, which are important to young people (Ball et al, 2000).

However, these latter choices also involve expenses and are constrained by available income. Financial time options are central, as they determine the extent of choice and dependence a young person experiences. As Holden (1992) emphasises, for many young people there are few real alternatives, and their first time option after leaving school may be influenced by a lack of idea of what they want, misunderstanding of the social security system and the wish to have a break (as school was stressful for many of these young people).

Over a period of between 18 months and two years, very few of the 132 young people in Holden's study stayed within their first time option. Many made more than 7 moves between family, employment, education and income support (Holden 1992, flow chart insert). Their movements were rarely systematic, but rather based on *ad hoc* opportunities, such as training courses and casual jobs. This emphasises the fallacy of linear assumptions and the complexity of young people's trajectories.

Perhaps this is a characteristic of late modernity. Beck (1992) has pointed to the shift of predictable biographies common in the industrial era to the more individualised biographies of our current 'risk society'. While Beck talks about 'choice' he recognises (unlike many politicians, eg. Kemp, 2000) that the choices available to young people from different social backgrounds are subject to structural constraints. As he puts it: "Poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks" (Beck, 1992: 35).

But as Furlong & Cartmel (1997) have pointed out, the fragmentation of social structures (such as changes in the nature of the family and reduced membership of unions) together with the emphasis on individualist values, obscure the continuing influence of structural factors on young people's lives. The language of choice, even with the injunction made by Beck, carries the risk of adding to this.

In the last two decades or so, education has been increasingly constructed as a consumer product, with schools cast as competitors in an education market. The current Federal Minister for Education recently stated:

> I make no apology for putting [..] parent choice at the centre of the Government's schools agenda. (Kemp, 2000: 1)

This means that parents (and students themselves) are now seen as responsible for the consumer choices they make, and for the negative consequences if they make 'poor choices' or have no choice to make (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). The ideologies of individual choice and meritocracy predominate in western society, and young people are "likely to blame themselves for any lack of success" (Ball et al, 2000: 4).

However, in reality some parents and students have greater financial and cultural resources and thus a wider range of possible choices than others, as was clearly shown in the British context by Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) in an earlier study. Structural inequality, hegemony -- and the value schools attach to different types of cultural capital - continue to play a role.

In the context of the research and conceptual framework outlined above, this paper will report on research conducted in two "second chance" Senior Colleges. The

paper will show why schools have not worked for the early school leavers in this study, how they have travelled from leaving high school to eventually coming to the Senior Colleges, and what it is the Colleges do that does seem to work. Both survey data from the "early leaver" students at the Colleges, and a case study from one early school leaver (Jenny) will be used to do this. First, however, it is necessary to give a brief overview of early leaving in Australia.

2. Early leaving in Australia

In 1986 Anderson predicted that "Before long, the Australian term `early leaver' is likely to acquire the same pejorative overtones that `drop-out' has in the United States" (148). At that time school retention in Australia had already increased to 49%, from 35% in 1980 (DEET, 1993). As more young people stayed on at school to obtain the year 12 qualification, those who left indeed became increasingly stigmatised. By 1991, when retention had risen as high as 71% (DEET, 1993), the government commissioned Finn Report proposed a target for 95% of 19 year olds to have completed year 12 or an equivalent by 2001 (Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991). Early leaving had become unacceptable.

The target as recommended by the Finn committee has been widely accepted. The reasons given by the Finn Report (as well as other government documents) why more young people should continue on in post compulsory education and training are largely economic. Table 1 shows that benefits are expected both for individual young people and society as a whole.

Table 1: Australian government reasons for increasing participation in postcompulsory education

o better preparation for work
o improve career prospects
o reduce youth unemployment
o increase the national skills base
o meet increased requirements of the work force (eg. skills and flexibility)
o increase the international competitiveness of Australia

Although these reasons are legitimate, some criticisms on the underlying assumptions are possible:

- Government reasoning is largely based on human capital theory, but not all young people, as shown in the previous section, make (and carry out) decisions about education and work in calculated, rational-instrumental ways. According to a Schools Council report the majority of school students don't have "specific ideas about careers or firm ideas of how to go about choosing" (1995a, 26). Rather, their 'choices' are influenced by their structural and cultural context, and leisure-related decisions may be as important to them as work-related ones;

- While employment is vital to young people, a good education also has other social purposes; to help young people to become confident, self-fulfilled, well-informed and active citizens;

- Australian governments blame young people for youth unemployment, because *they* are lacking in qualifications. However, improving the quality of the supply of labour does not deal with the problem of a lack of demand;

- Employers use qualifications to 'screen' job applicants and, faced with more people who are more highly qualified, increase their recruitment criteria, regardless of the irrelevance of these qualifications to the job (Tomlinson, 1999);

- A new 'minimum' has been established in the hierarchy of schooling used to 'sort' students, namely completion of year 12, or equivalent. Young people who do not achieve this have been, in effect, disqualified from most employment opportunities.

The last two decades have seen major economic and social changes (Blakers & Nicholson, 1988; Wyn & Lamb, 1996). During the recession in the 1970s the youth labour market has collapsed and especially the manufacturing industries were badly affected. Industrial restructuring has changed the nature of work to become more casualised and less secure. A decline in union membership has reduced the power of unions to protect workers. The position of women in the family and work force has changed, and so have the social and community networks which have supported people in the past. Since the 1970s, job prospects for young people have deteriorated, with job losses in agriculture, manufacturing and clerical work, and a conversion from full time to part time jobs (Irving et al, 1995). At the same time, our society has become more knowledge-based, and those without a post compulsory education are increasingly marginalised.

Therefore, while keeping the above comments in mind, it is worthwhile to have educational institutions which improve the possibilities for young people to gain a post compulsory qualification. The limited number of jobs available mean that school leavers play a game of musical chairs. Completing Year 12 gives young people at least a fighting chance in this game (Crump and Te Riele, 1999).

Consequences Of Early Leaving

School retention to Year 12 has grown from 35% in 1980 to 77% in 1993, and since then has fallen slightly to 72% in 1998 (ABS, 1999a). Despite increases in school retention over the past two decades, the composition of the group of early leavers has remained very similar. They are drawn in unrepresentatively large numbers from low socio-economic backgrounds, government schools, rural areas, Aboriginal backgrounds, and boys (Blakers, 1990; Lamb, 1996).

The employment prospects for early leavers are poor. For 15-19 year olds unemployment currently stands at about 18% (ABS, 1999b). Early leavers have

borne the brunt of this (Blakers, 1990; Dorrance & Hughes, 1996). Much higher proportions of early leavers, and especially female early leavers, are unemployed in the first year out of school. As Table 2 shows, this was already the case in the early 1980s, but for both male and female early leavers this deteriorated over the next decade "despite smaller numbers of early leavers competing for jobs" (Lamb, 1996: 9).

Table 2: Unemployment as main activity in first year out of school

	Females		Males	
	early 1980s	mid 1990s	early 1980s	mid 1990s
Early Leavers	23%	37%	14%	30%
Yr 12 Completers	10%	9%	14%	14%

Source: Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000: table 5.7

This disadvantage continues after the first year. In 1997 the overall unemployment rate for people aged 15-64 was 9%, but for people across the whole age group who had not completed school unemployment stood at 13% (ABS, 1998).

When early leavers do get a job, it tends to be less skilled, for shorter periods of time and provide less job training, making it hard to develop a career (Wyn & White, 1997). Average weekly earnings are 21% less for 15-24 year olds without post-school qualifications compared to those with post-school qualifications (ABS, 1998).

With the risk of unemployment so high, why do young people continue to drop out of education? The labour market does not have a strong effect in `pulling' young people out of the education system, and many early leavers are aware of their low job prospects (Schools Council, 1995b: 13). The research literature shows, instead, that young people are `pushed' out of schools (Holden & Dwyer, 1992; Spierings, 1999; Wyn and Lamb, 1996).

Young people tend to leave school early because they are alienated from schooling. They have negative relationships with teachers and find the curriculum irrelevant, uninteresting and too hard. It would, therefore, be counterproductive to force these young people to stay at school. Those young people who are alienated from schooling or experience "learning fatigue" (Ball et al, 2000) may be better off leaving school and returning at a later stage.

However, re-entering school is not without its problems. In a study of 132 early school leavers in Victoria 21% attempted returning to school, but of those 63% left again before completing, largely due to the same school-related issues that made them leave initially (Holden, 1992). Moreover, some young people who tried to return to school were refused entry because they were perceived as troublemakers (Holden, 1992). For these young people it is necessary to provide alternative structures or `second chance' education.

> I went back to the same school but my friends harassed me so I left again. This time I have tried returning to a different school ... because it's a senior campus and there is no uniform. I like this school better so I hope I can stay here. (Maree in Dwyer et al, 1998, in Spierings, 1999, p.7)

Alternative institutions that provide students with the opportunity to complete their secondary education are not widespread. This paper will now report on two 'second chance' Senior Colleges in New South Wales. Both Colleges are situated in relatively disadvantaged areas, as indicated by the figures in Table 3, although Ruby Senior College less so, despite a much higher ratio of students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds.

However, the population of the Colleges is not socially homogenous. Some students attended private or selective public schools previously, and some come from relatively wealthy families.

Table 3: Indicators of disadvantage for the localities of the Senior Colleges

	retention to year 12 (1993)	unemployment rate age 15-24(1991)	NESB[a] students at secondary school age 12-24 (1991)
Sapphire Senior College [SSC]	58.0%	25.1%	18.5%
Ruby Senior College [RSC]	66.6%	22.3%	53.0%
New South Wales overall	66.6%	19.0%	19.0%

Source: NSW Office of Youth Affairs, 1994

[a] NESB = Non English Speaking Background

Sapphire Senior College offers a Year 10 program aimed specifically at older students who have been out of education for some time, as well as one for 16-17 year old students, as part of the federal government Full Service Program. Ruby Senior College also has a Full Service Year 10 program. Both Colleges run some 'bridging' style courses in literacy, numeracy or English language skills as well. However, in both Colleges the majority of students are in Year 11 and 12. Students have to be 15 years or older to enrol. Ages range from 15 to 60, but most students are aged between 15-19 years.

3. Second chance colleges

According to Cotterell (1990), the slow climb in retention rates during the 1970s meant that already by the early 1980s there was growing recognition (at least amongst academics) that schools had to change to cater for the increasingly diverse senior student population. Schools have indeed changed in the past two decades, mainly by broadening the curriculum to include more vocational type subjects. This has been a major step forward, which has the potential to meaningfully (re-)engage marginalised students in education (Crump & Te Riele, 1999).

However, the basic belief system of most teachers has not changed because secondary education in Australia is infused with individual meritocratic ideology. The assumption is that success depends on a student having reasonable ability and being prepared to put in the work. This is moderated by the recognition that external factors, such as personal trauma or lack of money, may interfere, and most schools have services such as counsellors and financial assistance schemes that provide assistance. However, these are 'add-ons' which do not fundamentally challenge the meritocratic ideology. External constraints are seen as working on an individual rather than a structural level.

Many of the staff at the Senior Colleges in this study recognise that outcomes from schooling are not simply based on merit, that for many young people structural barriers exist which disadvantage them in school, regardless of their ability and effort. These teachers see it as their mission to cater for students who have not succeeded elsewhere, and are more likely to blame "life outside" than the students themselves for that lack of success. However, the teachers' perspectives remain largely based on the individual student level, rather than extend to questions about the dominant hegemonic culture of schooling which works to exclude certain students.

These views are not shared across the school nor are they unproblematic. There are tensions (both between teachers at the Colleges and within individual teacher's beliefs) between a social mission and a persistent institutional meritocratic belief, both of which legitimise much of what schools do. Nevertheless, the stronger than usual recognition of external constraints and of students as individual people who have a life outside of school, fundamentally influences the approach at the Colleges.

The central concept underpinning the 'second chance' approach, mentioned by both staff and students, is "support." The Colleges take as a starting point what Blakers and Nicholson (1988: 46) suggest for all good education:

> schools [must] ask a different questions about each student: not, as at present, Where does this student fit into our categories and processes?, but rather, How can we build on the interests, capacities and experiences which make her or him a unique individual?

One way in which the Colleges attempt to cater for a variety of individual interest is by offering a broad curriculum, including many Vocational Education and Training (VET) streams. On the surface their core business is the same as any other high

school: to prepare students for the School Certificate and HSC, and so follow guidelines from the Board of Studies. However, they make a point of offering a wide variety of subjects as well as many alternative pathways, such as Full Service Programs for Year 10 and 'limited UAI' study for the HSC[4].

Moreover, the approach to teaching subjects is different. The HSC may (for the last time this year) be based on competition between students, but the emphasis in the Colleges is on cooperation. In class, students are encouraged to help each other, and the peer group offers strong support in coping with exam stress. The life knowledge of students is validated and welcomed in class discussions. The focus is not just on skill and knowledge acquisition but on building social relationships, personal confidence and independent initiative. These are particularly important in the context of adolescent development (Cotterell, 1990).

School support

While the Colleges do not seem to have additional support services, their services get used much more intensively than at many schools. Services include a careers adviser, counsellors, learning difficulties support teacher, and English as a Second Language support. At both Colleges these people have a relatively high profile, and teachers refer students quite often. Sapphire Senior College also has structured support programs for students, for instance with the careers adviser and the counsellor attached to the Year 10 program.

Individual teachers also emphasise building a relationship with the students and make themselves available to students who need extra assistance. Many students, when asked what they like most about the College, mention the supportiveness of teachers.

When a student is absent from the College, they receive a "friendly phone call". The aim of this is to find out if there are any problems the College can help with, and to encourage students to continue attending. If students have no real reason for their absence, the deputy principal calls them in to remind them that they must take some responsibility for their own education, in keeping with the more mature learning environment of the College. If there are problems, the College provides support itself, or can refer students to outside agencies.

The most obvious difference with mainstream high schools that any visitor at the Colleges would immediately notice is the absence of uniforms and bells. This could be interpreted as simply removing symbols of authority that many students have rebelled against in the past, or even just as recognition that uniforms are inappropriate for the older students. However, to many teachers the reason goes deeper, as it signals to students that the school takes them seriously, and trusts that as responsible (young) adults they can make sure they come to school in appropriate clothes, and that they are capable of getting to lessons on time. It is not just about taking away coercion, it is about giving trust and accepting autonomy. Furthermore, it is supported by a disciplinary approach which is not based on punishment (there is no detention for instance) but on reasonable dialogue and responsibility.

A number of studies have shown that students are less likely to behave in "delinquent" ways if teachers are less authoritarian in their use of power, and the school has a student centred approach and broad curriculum, and emphasises cooperation instead of competition (Finlayson & Loghran, 1976; Figueira-McDonough, 1986). These are all characteristics of the Colleges.

Nevertheless, the loose disciplinary approach is counter-intuitive to many mainstream teachers. Staff at the Colleges find that teachers from other schools are surprised at the low level of behavioural problems at the Colleges, especially since many of the students were considered problematic at their previous schools.

4. Early leavers

Not all the students at the two Senior Colleges are early school leavers returning to education after a break of some months, years or decades. Many are continuing students, who complete year 9 or year 10 at a mainstream high school, and after the summer break continue on at the College. Also, Ruby Senior College has a large number of migrants, who have completed their initial English language training and want to obtain an Australian high school qualification. Finally, there are some students who have completed Year 12 in the past, but are returning to upgrade their skills and knowledge. In this paper however, I will focus on early school leavers returning to education at the Senior Colleges.

Students at the Colleges were surveyed, with a response rate of about 60%. The surveys show there is little gender difference between the previous early leavers and the other students. As would be expected, more of the early school leavers are aged 26 and over (see Table 4).

Table 4: Student population by gender and age group

	male	female	16-19	20-25	26+	Total
Early leavers	44	58	53	18	31	102
Other students [a]	120	145	187	59	19	265

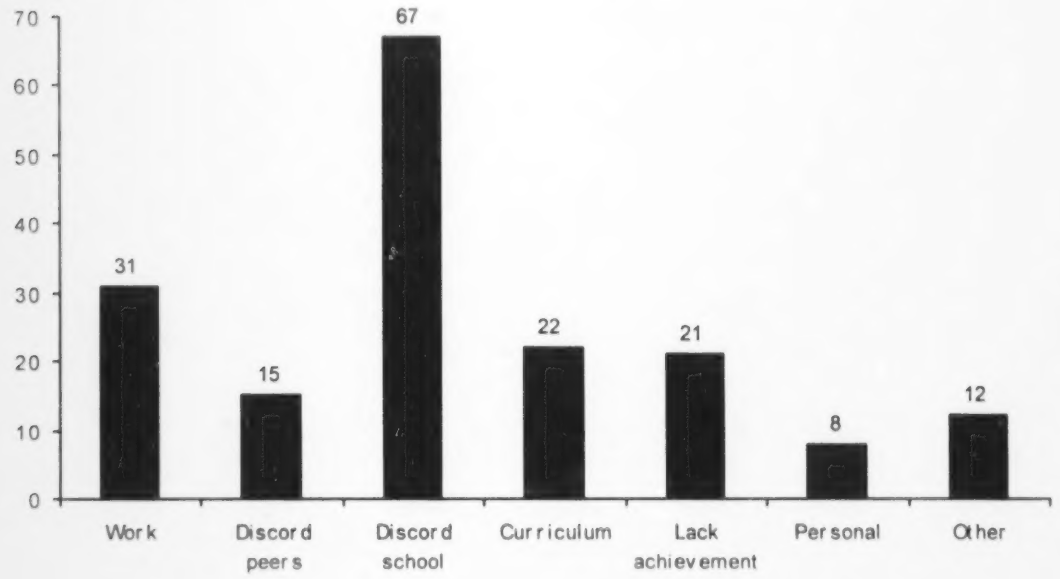
[a] 'Other students' includes migrants, continuing students, Year 12 completers and those whose status is unknown.

The lowest previous education level reached by early leaver students is year 7, the highest Year 11. However, most of these students left school after Year 9 (36%) or Year 10 (37%).

Why school did not work

Students were asked to nominate as many reasons as applicable for leaving their previous school. Graph 1 shows that most reasons were school related. Discord with school includes such reasons as not getting on with teachers, dislike of the rules and regulations, experiencing racism, and being asked to leave because the school considers the student a troublemaker. Curriculum reasons include finding the subjects irrelevant or boring. Personal reasons include ill-health, family breakdown, having a baby and simply wanting a change. Work reasons include both finding a job, and wanting to find a job.

Graph 1: Reasons for leaving previous school (N=102)[5]



This confirms previous research that has shown that students are pushed out by a perceived negative school environment rather than pulled out by the world of work. While these are the reasons given by individual early school leavers, their meaning lies deeper than individual personalities or problems. The experiences of these students point to a fundamental mismatch between their lives and the school. While this shows that meritocratic ideology is problematic, the ideology remains unchallenged because the rebelling students leave the school environment. Take for instance the case of Jenny (next page).

Jenny is now in her late thirties, and was at high school in the late 1970s. She was considered "dumb" at high school, and put in a lower stream known as the "dunce" class. She felt that she was not dumb. She knew she had some problems with literacy and mathematics but as she says now: "I knew I was capable of doing this work, but nobody had the time to show me."

She did not get on with the other students, was an "outsider" in her own words. For these two reasons she tried going to another public high school, but was beaten up by students there, and so returned to her old high school. Her mum had said she did not have to stay at school after she turned fifteen.

Despite all this Jenny was determined to "stick it out." She compared herself to some of the senior students and thought "If they can do it I can do it."

When she returned to her old high school, Jenny wanted to prove herself to her peers to be "in with the crowd" and make school life more bearable. Older students used to 'initiate' first year students, and Jenny decided to take part in this ritual, and pinned a girl "in the butt with a darning needle." She was caught and made an example of. The principal made her stand up at the front of the assembly and told the school that she would be expelled for what she had done. A week before she turned fifteen she had to leave school.
[SSC-138]

School practices allowed Jenny to be labelled as lacking intelligence. Although she felt herself to be capable, teachers did not seem to find it worthwhile investing time and effort into helping her. Jenny's parents had received little education. Teachers knew that her mum had been expelled from school herself, and did not encourage Jenny to stay on. While Jenny makes it sound as though the 'pinning' was her first act of misbehavior, it is unlikely she would have been expelled just for one incident. Nevertheless, as a working class, low-achieving girl who did not fit in well in the school, it was easy for the principal to choose Jenny as the example for the other students. Despite her difficulties and lack of encouragement from her mother Jenny valued education. But it seems the school did not value her. In terminology from Ball et al (2000: 146) Jenny was at a low level in "the economy of student worth".

While Jenny should not have hurt that first year girl (and Jenny is quick to say this herself), her action was influenced by her treatment by peers and the school. These in part stemmed from her working class background. Neither her parents nor Jenny herself were in a position to negotiate with the school about her work and her relationship with other students. Her labelling as a "dunce" may have contributed to her negative action. American research has shown that students who are placed In reply to: lower streams in high school are more likely to engage in vandalism in the schools than students in higher stream classes (Tygart 1988, in Rigby, 1990: 46).

Three male students who, like Jenny, went to high school in the late seventies, left school for labouring work or trade apprenticeships. Tony, John, and Peter found school too authoritarian and were keen to get out into the 'real' world. Both the social environment and the knowledge and skills valued by the school are often at odds with adolescents. Working class boys who value practical relevance and are experiencing autonomy in other areas of their lives may be especially sensitive to this. However, exchanging the world of school for the world of work may not bring the improvement they expect. As shown in detail by Willis in the UK (1977) the kind of jobs these working class boys get are often equally authoritarian as school. Ironically, returning to the Senior College forms a second chance at 'escape' for Tony and Peter, while John found he needed more education to be able to run his own business.

The trajectory to the Senior Colleges

As argued in the introduction, the image of life as a linear progression through school and possibly further study to work, marriage and adulthood is a fallacy. The assumption of linearity is clearly challenged by the experiences of early school leavers who return to the Senior Colleges, as highlighted by Jenny.

When Jenny was expelled from school, a week before she turned fifteen, she gave up on her hopes to complete high school. She found a factory job making fluorescent lights, but soon fell pregnant and had her first baby before she turned 16. She ended up having six children, and after some time retuned to part time work as an industrial cleaner.

The next turning point in her life came when her second last child died when she was only a year old. She became a student of medicine and the human body, as she says "off my own bat", and started doing voluntary work for the Red Cross.

She decided she wanted to go back to formal study, and tried finishing year 10 through a correspondence course with OTEN. This turned out to be hard to combine with looking after her husband and children, especially since she had a young son still at home. As soon as he started going to school she enrolled at the Senior College.

Her interest in the human body and health has intensified since she has fallen ill with cancer. She wants to go to university to study Biology or Nursing. Her dream is to eventually do a PhD in Cell Biology.
[SSC - 138]

Other students' experiences bear out this non-linearity of movement through work and study. Of the three male contemporaries of Jenny, Tony found his work as a spray-painter made him ill, and decided he wanted to retrain in the computer area. He is doing Year 10 at the College, and then wants to do a pathway combining a TAFE certificate in IT with the HSC [SSC - 156]. John set up his own business, first

within his own trade, and then in security. He realised he needed better literacy skills as well as some business knowledge, and came to the Senior College. John is in Year 11 now, but hopes to get a UAI high enough to go to university to become a secondary teacher. He says: "Once I started I'm enjoying it" [SSC - 153].

Peter went from one job to another before moving to Tasmania, where at age 19 he attempted to complete senior secondary education, but found it hard to fit in with school discipline. He went back to work and got married, before trying to do the HSC through TAFE. Peter found it too hard to combine TAFE with working. Then his marriage broke up, his father died and he lost his job, leading to "a bit of a need to re-invent myself". Having worked as a labourer all his life, of which ten years as a coalminer, Peter would like to get enough education to get an office job. His life experience helps him with school work, and he feels strongly that for many young people it would be better to leave school for a while and come back to complete it when they are more mature:

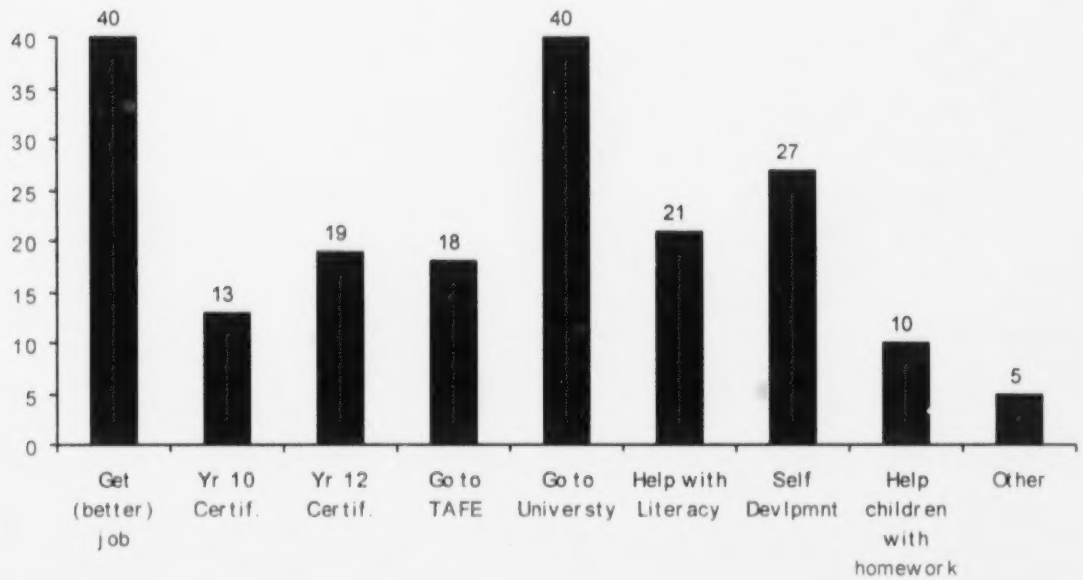
> I just think it's crazy, I just find that people at the age of 18 and 17 are under all this pressure. And they've got their hormones running around and they've got all sorts of things happening in their lives that are really more important than school. I believe that you should be 21, 22, 23 before you should be making all these major decisions in life or going through these major exams that are going to affect the rest of your life. When you are ready to handle it. [...] This idea of kids staying at school because the government wants to look after unemployed figures and forcing people virtually to do the HSC when they don't really want to do it and they are not ready for it is crazy. I think you get out there in the wider world and then you can really evaluate what you want in life. But until you have been out in the world you really don't know what you want. [SSC - 137]

Peter acknowledges that life in the 'real' world is not necessarily better than school, but thinks it is an important experience which helps a person decide where they want to go. The trajectories between leaving high school and arriving at the Senior Colleges of these people, and some younger early leaver students, are summarised in Appendix 1. Even these basic summaries highlight the fact that the broader life experiences of young people (such as pregnancy, ill health and having one's flat burn down) cannot be "bracketed out" (Dwyer & Wyn, 1998: 296). Moreover, it would be mistaken to put too much emphasis on individual choices in the trajectories, as the life chances of these people were constrained by social structures. Uncertainty and complexity are evident in courses started and dropped, and both courses and jobs taken were much influenced by what was available. In return, it is partly their experience of the limited availability of 'good' jobs, that convinces many of these students that they want to get a qualification.

> There's definitely a social division and it is increasing. You wonder how long the government is going to be able to uphold benefits. So you've just got to get ahead. Qualifications on paper make such a difference. [SSC - 180]

Graph 2 shows the purposes of returning to education for all early school leavers at the Colleges. In line with the quote above, some students simply want to get the Year 10 or Year 12 certificate. But many see their study at the College as leading on to either work or further study.

Graph 2: Purpose for study at Senior College (N=102)



Considering their previous largely negative experiences in education, it is encouraging to note that almost 60% of these students want to continue on to TAFE or University[6]. The purposes of getting help with literacy skills, self development and to be able to help their children with homework were given predominantly by students over age 20.

Experiences in the Senior College

Previous research has shown that early school leavers returning to mainstream education tend to drop out again (Holden, 1992). Obstacles to do with the unchanged, alienating school environment are compounded by teacher prejudices because of the student's past, age discrepancies with other students, peer pressure, and a perception that school is even less relevant now.

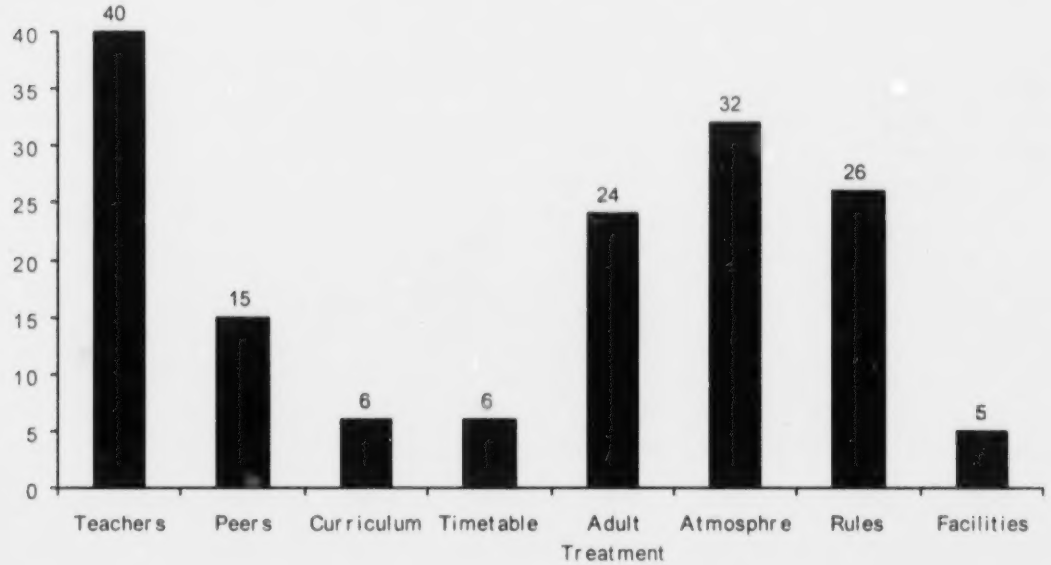
Teachers in the Senior Colleges realise that if students are to succeed, they need to provide something a little different to mainstream education. One teacher observed:

> Certainly the purpose of the College is involved with giving students a second chance, wherever they come from, and trying to support the students in the choices they have made. [...] As a member of staff I see students come in here who have made a choice to come here because it is different, or because they are different. I see that the purpose of the College is to meet their needs, what ever they may be. To me that is *not* offering them what they have had before. If they haven't succeeded at what we call a normal sort of school then we would not want to offer them the same again. [ML, teacher SSC]

As set out in section 3 above, the Colleges are different to mainstream education in a variety of ways. They provide access to the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate, as do other schools, but offer a broader than usual curriculum, including a wide range of VET subjects. The approach to teaching is more cooperative and student centred and a personalised relationship between staff and students is emphasised. This is evidenced by a supportive rather than punitive disciplinary approach and an emphasis on students' autonomy and mature responsibility.

Both the surveys and interviews with students show that they appreciate this different approach. The survey included an open question asking what they liked best about the Senior College (see Graph 3). Students especially comment on the quality of the teachers, the adult treatment, the atmosphere at the Colleges, and the more reasonable rules and regulations.

Graph 3: What students like about the Senior Colleges (N=102)[7]



What students like about teachers at the Senior Colleges is their friendliness and the amount of support they give. This creates an environment in which it is easier for students to attend school and reach their goals. Instead of teachers making "false judgements" [RSC - 159] based on the student's past, they offer support.

Students comment that this approach is indeed different from their experiences at previous schools.

> The teachers are all great & they actually talk to their students. The learning is so much better then when I went to school.
> [SSC - 98, F, 26-39]

> The adult environment is fantastic and it is better than all other high schools. [RSC - 65, M, 15-19]

Students feel that teachers treat them as adults. This is important to many teenagers who feel more mature than most schools give them credit for. This adult treatment is linked with respect, and seen as a two way street by some students: "more respect from teachers which in turn makes us respect them more" [SSC - 75, M, 16-19]. The adult treatment also reinforces the College philosophy that students are here by choice:

> The freedom of being treated like an adult and the more relaxed attitude to the work because the people are here because they want to better themselves not because they have to be. [SSC - 2, M, 16-19]

A large number of students comment that what they like about the College is the relaxed atmosphere.

> There is no tension between students or teachers which is great
> [SSC - 95, F, 20-25]

The last aspect of the College many students like is that rules are more reasonable. Most comment on the absence of school uniform and being allowed to smoke, as well as on the general freedom.

> I like the fact that I can wear what I want without being hassled (my old school took one look at me and wanted me out). I like being able to smoke openly. [RSC - 159, F, 15-19]

> The freedom in the school, you're not treated like you're in jail.
> [SSC - 64, M, 16-19]

> No irrelevant rules eg) not allowed out school grounds etc. People don't try to rebel because the authority is fair and applies to all ages
> [SSC - 74, F, 16-19]

The survey also asked students to nominate anything they would like to change about the College. Almost 40% of these Early Leaver students said they did not want any change. Changes wanted by some of the others include more computer

facilities, a sports team, a later start or earlier finish of the timetable, and better transport to the College.

Interestingly, some of the older students, including Jenny, would like their peers to be less disruptive. Having made the decision to come back to education, they have little patience with younger students who are still somewhat rebellious. Nevertheless, Jenny is happy she came to the College. Like many students in the survey, she emphasises the sense of support she gets in the College.

Jenny says she made the right decision to come to the College. Her understanding of mathematics is improving through the help of the support group, she is relieved to finally know how to do punctuation, and she loves the debates she has with the Science teacher. She is looking forward to studying Biology and Chemistry in Year 11 next year. She says: "Since being here it has opened my eyes a bit better that there's a lot more that I need to know to get further into what I want to do."

When asked about the "best thing about the College" Jenny singles out the support from the staff: "They give us time out ... If we think we're finding it difficult to cope we can say 'I need 5 minutes time out to have a smoke or a cup of tea'. They're fine with that. They are extremely supportive here". Being treated as an equal by teachers, getting help when she needs it, and getting positive feedback, all contribute to Jenny feeling comfortable and confident that she can achieve.

The things Jenny would like to change about the College stem from her own strong motivation to learn. She finds some fellow students a bit disruptive or pushy, and would like them to either leave or quieten down. Jenny would also like to be able to attend another class when she has a free period and then finish the day earlier.

In the end, Jenny comes back to the need for individual support:
"Whether it be high school, college or university, what they need is what they've got here: a lot of understanding, a lot of teachers taking time out, not just to focus on one or two students but to focus on the whole class. And if they see someone who is struggling to help and may be get some support going in the school system. Because there is a lot of kids going through hard times or you've got abuse or anything, and you need that kind of support there. [..] The Catholic schools and the private schools have all this, where the public system hasn't. They are just treating us as another number, which is absolutely incorrect, it's wrong. We are individuals and I think we should have the same benefits that they have."
[SSC - 138]

5. Discussion

These results from the Senior Colleges provide two insights. First, it is possible to educate alienated and disadvantaged people in a more constructive manner than usually happens. The Senior Colleges are not revolutionary, they have not totally overthrown the hegemonic curriculum and individual meritocratic ideology. As two

relatively small institutions, they certainly have not changed the economic and social structure of society. Critical social theory (particularly the more structuralist forms) can be somewhat disheartening: in the face of pervasive structural inequalities, what can a person do? It is, therefore, encouraging to note that with a range of relatively minor changes, the Senior Colleges manage to re-engage students with education, and assist them in gaining a sense of control over their lives. The Colleges don't work for everyone, they do lose some students every year, especially among the youngest age group who feel they have to be there. Indeed, several students commented that the reason they are doing well now is a combination of the better educational environment and their own increased maturity and motivation.

This leads to the second insight. If the assumption of linearity is discarded, and the idea of continuing education taken seriously, then our education system needs to be re-structured in such a way that people (after age 15) do not feel compelled to stay at school. Influenced by high youth unemployment figures and two decades of post compulsory education policy aimed at increasing retention, common wisdom dictates that young people should complete senior secondary education. However, for a substantial minority of students who are alienated from schooling this is counterproductive. The experience of students at the Senior Colleges shows that it is more beneficial for these people to engage in a learning environment by choice, when they are ready for it. Retention may be increased not just through a linear pathway, by keeping young people in school, but also by providing structures that allow young people to leave education and come back at a later stage. Both the economic goals of the Australian government and the well being of these individual people would benefit.

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[1] Paper presented at the AARE Conference 2000, 4-7 December, University of Sydney, Australia.

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

[3] In Canada, according to Anisef and Andres (1996) a 'drop out crisis' was *created* by the government to deflect public attention away from massive youth unemployment.

[4] The Full Service Programs have been funded for two years by the Federal government in conjunction with the introduction of the Common Youth Allowance, to help schools cater for 16 and 17 year olds who want to leave school but are no longer eligible for income support if they do so. The Limited UAI program allows students older than 18 to take only 6 units of study (half the usual) and still gain a UAI for entry into university.

[5] Students could indicate more than one reason for leaving, so values add up to more than the total of 102 'early leaver' students.

[6] Students could indicate more than one purpose for study, so values add up to more than the total of 102 'early leaver' students.

[7] Several students liked a variety of aspects of the Colleges , so values add up to more than the total of 102 'early leaver' students.

APPENDIX 1: Trajectories to the Senior College

Student	Trajectory	Future plan
Jenny [age late thirties]	expelled in Year 9 ↦ factory job ↦ fell pregnant at age 15 ↦ family ↦ family + cleaning job ↦ family + individual study + voluntary work ↦ family + correspondence study (not completed) ↦ family + senior college	University: Biology or Nursing Dream: PhD in Cell Biology
Tony [age late thirties]	left after Year 10 ↦ pre-apprenticeship in spray painting ↦ unemployed ↦ apprenticeship spray painting ↦ ill health ↦ TAFE: year 10 (not completed) ↦ painting job ↦ senior college	Combined pathway: TAFE certificate in IT and HSC
John [age late thirties]	left after Year 10 ↦ apprenticeship boilermaker ↦ own business boilermaker ↦ own business security + coaching at surf club ↦ own business + senior college	University, possibly Secondary Education
Peter [age late thirties]	left in Year 10 ↦ various labouring jobs ↦ senior college (Tas) (not completed) ↦ coal mining job ↦ unemployed ↦ TAFE HSC (not completed) ↦ job ↦ marriage ends and loose job ↦ senior college	Complete HSC, find an office job.
Jane [age 17]	expelled in Year 8 ↦ other high school, expelled again end of year 8 ↦ community centre program for 'drop outs' ↦ expelled from 'behavioural program' ↦ TAFE Year 10 ↦ flat burnt down: dropped TAFE course ↦ Year 9 by correspondence (not completed) ↦ senior college	Complete Year 10 and may be do HSC, find work
Richard [age 19]	left after year 10 ↦ other high school left in Year 11 ↦ unemployed ↦ retail job ↦ promoted to shift manager ↦ TAFE HSC (not completed) + work ↦ work ↦ TAFE HSC (not completed) + work ↦ work ↦ part time work + senior college	University, possibly accounting or law
Cathy [age early twenties]	left after year 11 ↦ work plus TAFE certificate in child care ↦ youth work job ↦ unemployed ↦ senior college	University, social work or education, to work with remote aboriginal communities
Susan [age early twenties]	left in year 12 ↦ travel + casual work ↦ TAFE certificate ↦ work experience + acting in plays ↦ met boyfriend & moved to locality of college ↦ senior college	Study naturopathy, or drama